

# Mother's Menus

Mother must have been a good cook, or at least a dedicated one – Penn tells us of how Mother began on Page 1 of the Betty Crocker cookbook and worked her way through. What I recall is that in those computer-free days of the 50s she would take a selection of leftovers and create a new meal. One time she shocked even me, when corn ended up in the Sunday brunch. I confronted her: “Mother, there is corn in these pancakes!” “Well, it’s good for you!” was the answer. How could I argue with that?

That was the one meal that our father cooked: Sunday morning waffles (or pancakes). Mother put the batter together from Aunt Jemima pancake and waffle mix, and Dad fired up the square waffle iron and started the assembly line. We four kids did our part by smearing on the butter (or rather, margarine – I don’t recall we ever used butter, it was margarine forever) and pouring on the Log Cabin syrup.

Much, much earlier in my eating memories is my war years’ recollection of being assigned the task of breaking the color capsule in the plastic white margarine package and massaging the yellow dye until it all looked uniform. Then it was cut open and squeezed into a butter mold or a bowl on the table. This bizarre part of butter history came about from the powerful American dairy lobby:<sup>1</sup>

Those who were children in the 1940s remember the triumph of margarine. It was often their job, after all, to turn the white, lard-like stuff into something resembling edible. “You got a little capsule that you broke that had yellow color in it, and you mixed it in to make it look like you had yellow spread,” recalled a wartime resident of New Jersey.

As production increased over the years since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, prices dropped and margarine looked to become a popular, low-cost alternative to butter. This possibility caught the attention of the American dairy industry, which did what any industry would do in the same situation: it lobbied politicians to protect its economic turf. The industry launched a propaganda campaign that ran strong for decades, paying off in the form of federal and state laws that did everything from banning the sale of margarine to requiring it to be dyed black.

Courts shot down the most egregious of those laws, but the ones that survived for the long haul—taxes and coloring bans—did a lot of damage. The ostensible reason behind outlawing artificial yellow color in margarine was that it was designed to fool consumers into believing they were buying and using genuine butter. There was a kernel of truth to this exaggeration: some unscrupulous bulk dealers of margarine did try to pass off yellow margarine as butter. But the real reason behind the dairy industry’s push for coloring bans was that a butter substitute that looked like lard was not going to win over potential buyers who wanted something appetizing to spread on their bread. By 1895, 19 states had adopted laws forbidding the sale of yellow margarine; by 1932, that number had risen to 27. Soon, margarine sales in America had fallen to half their peak.



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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.americainwwii.com/articles/victorys-spread/>, retrieved 26 Oct 2017.



Mother's menus were supplemented by our maid, "Crazy Annie"<sup>2</sup> for awhile, then Bertha Bug. The maid would come on Saturday morning, clean all morning, and then fry up a big frying pan of fried chicken before she left. Good eatin'! The story was we lost Annie when she was found 'packing heat' as Pete described it, on a Houston city bus. There was no concealed carry law back in the 50s, and certainly not for colored folks. So after Annie was lost to law enforcement, we hired Bertha, who had a habit of taking some groceries home from the large pantry that existed under the stairs between the kitchen and the front door entryway. I recall when the government came out with a report that diet drink's sugar substitute saccharine had been known to cause cancer in rats and the FDA would be taking them off the shelf, Mother responded by going out and purchasing and stockpiling all those diet drinks she could find.<sup>3</sup>

My sisters used to tell me that whoever married me would have an easy time of pleasing me with her cooking after my being raised on an almost pure diet of mother's casseroles. Over forty years later, following Helen's death, two female members, one a divorcée, one a widow from my Lamar High School Class of 1959 sat on either side of me during our Medicare Cruise (April 2006) to warn this newly minted widower against "women bearing casseroles." Where were they during the 50s?

What are your memories of mother's menus?

Here are Penn's:

Here are Patti's:

Here are Pete's:

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<sup>2</sup> Pete tells the story of "Crazy Annie" in his stories under Chapter 11.

<sup>3</sup> 1969: The F.D.A. bans cyclamate when testing -much of which was done on sweeteners containing both saccharin and cyclamate -suggests that large doses cause bladder tumors in laboratory rats.